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Making and re-making history

Review: A History of The Iziko South African National Gallery

By Dave Mann (<http://www.thejournalist.org.za/contributors/dave-mann>)

'A History of The Iziko South African National Gallery – Reflections on Art and National Identity' by Anna Tietze (UCT Press), traverses the colonial past and unpacks the future of the gallery in the digital age. DAVE MANN reviews what he considers to be a dense, but important documentation of the gallery's place in SA.

Galleries are vital spaces, public places where we are able to contemplate and better understand the complexities and makings of our society. In this way, they are much like history museums, only their walls are lined with canvases and contain installations or sculpture works rather than taxidermy, ancient or antique objects, and glass-cased re-enactments of battle scenes and civilizations.

Cape Town's Iziko National Gallery is a historically complex, but vital combination of gallery space and museum that is known the world over. The story of the gallery is as interesting as the many stories it has come to house over the years.

A brief bit of history: The origins of the gallery can be traced back to the early 1870s after a collection of 45 artworks acquired from the estate of Thomas Butterworth Bayley needed a home. The main building was designed by Clelland & Mullins, from the Department of Public Works, and FK Kendall. It was completed in 1930, with funds from the Government, the City Council and the Hyman Liberman Estate.

Author Anna Tietze – lecturer, curator, and historian – has produced a dense and rigorously researched book, detailing the gallery’s meagre beginnings and tracing its journey throughout the years to the present. Tietze has a long history with Iziko and it shows through the factually rigorous elements of the book, as well as in the way she writes about the gallery.

**A HISTORY OF THE IZIKO
SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL GALLERY**

Reflections on art and
national identity



ANNA TIETZE

The journey she takes the reader on begins with questions about what a national gallery is, what it should contain, who it should serve, and more. In this way, your trip into the history of Iziko begins on an interrogative note, allowing for a read that guides and teaches rather than simply informing.

From there, the book traverses colonial pasts, the politics of acquisition, public shows and private collectors. It delves into the necessities of art during wartime and how wars shape a nation’s relationship to artworks. It moves through apartheid and the notion of the rainbow-nation, and how all of these things have shaped art, but also how artists, art buyers, and of course, gallery spaces have helped to either combat or reinforce

these histories. It is a thorough book and an important one, considering the influence that such an institution has had and continues to have on South Africa.

And while the book does maintain a high degree of academic rigour and tone, it is not without a bit of anecdotal humour. These small stories do well to break up the fact-heavy narrative of the book without detracting too much from the history of the gallery itself. How, for example, the gallery’s curator had to use his discretion in deciding whether to allow a group of schoolchildren to view a collection of statues comprising ‘nude gladiators, athletes, gods and goddesses’ which were otherwise kept behind permanently closed doors on account of their PG18 appearance. Or how, in the late 1870s, the gallery was motivated to open itself up to the people on Sunday afternoons “in order to distract a vulnerable public from ‘the canteen and other haunts of debasement and debauch.’” Who knew Iziko held such noble intentions back then?

The book concludes on an interesting note by unpacking the future of the gallery – and perhaps of all modern-day galleries – in the digital age. With increased digitisation of artworks and information, the possibility of bridging the gap in access and understanding is closer than ever. Similarly, the possibility of digital displays taking the place of physical displays, could solve many galleries and museums’ issues of space, and allow anyone with an internet connection to view a collection or an exhibition in a way that encourages young viewers ‘to engage with the museum on terms with which they feel familiar.’

The book can be a lengthy read, but it is an important one nonetheless. Read it if you are interested in art and the way it reflects, influences, and documents history. Read it if you are interested in the economy or the politics of stories, or even if you have no interest in any of these things, but you are keen on delving into the history of the country. Public galleries have a way of archiving the past through a truly unique lens, and Iziko, with all of its merits and challenges, serves as an excellent archive.

Buy the book on Amazon [here \(https://www.amazon.com/History-Iziko-African-National-Gallery/dp/1775822168\)](https://www.amazon.com/History-Iziko-African-National-Gallery/dp/1775822168).

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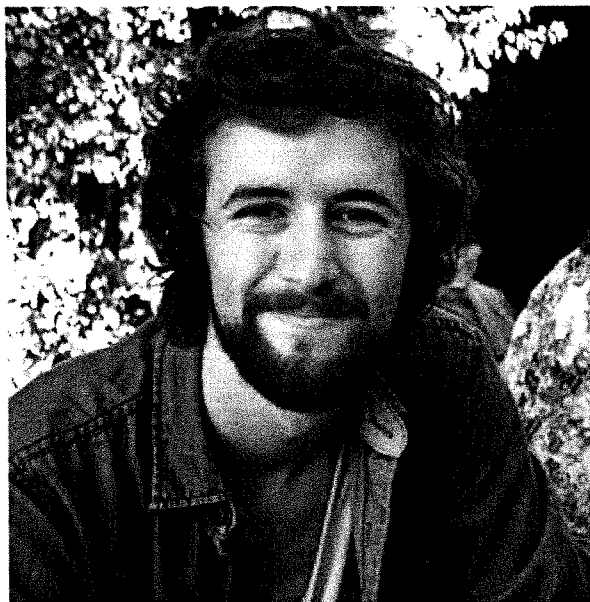
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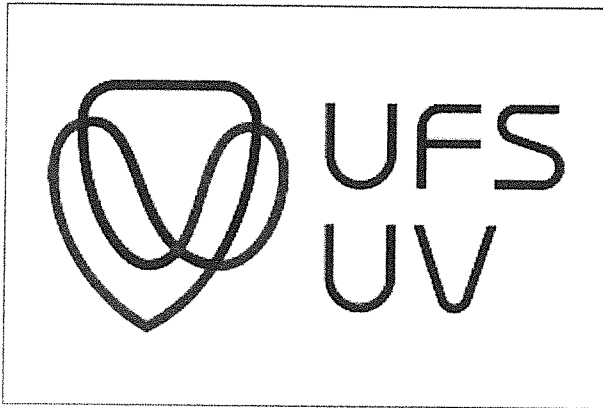
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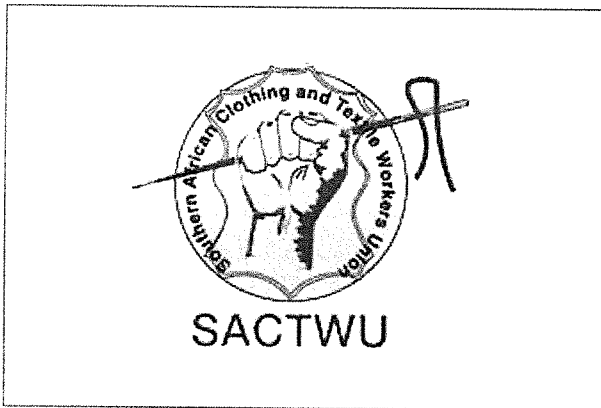


[DAVE MANN \(HTTP://WWW.THEJOURNALIST.ORG.ZA/CONTRIBUTORS/DAVE-MANN\)](http://www.thejournalist.org.za/contributors/dave-mann)

Dave Mann grew up in Cape Town where he spent far too much of his high school career skipping class to skate, paint graffiti, sneak into music venues, and generally get up to no good. Now he spends most of his time writing about all of those things.



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